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September 2001

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Bible Study: Teach Us to Pray
Sounds of Silence

The Well-Fed Soul
Surrender of Self





EDITORS' NOTE & LETTERS

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the premiere issue of the full-size, full-color **Lutheran Woman Today!** While we are quite excited about the new look, we are equally excited about what you'll find inside. In addition to the thought-provoking, uplifting articles on prayer and spirituality, this issue also kicks off the 2001-2002 Bible study, *Teach Us to Pray*, by James Arne Nestingen. This nine-part study provides insights into the Lord's Prayer and allows us to explore how we pray and what praying means. We have received many more letters than we have space to print, but here is a sampling. We've enjoyed your feedback. Thanks for sharing!

God's blessings, the Editors

Thoughts about the Bible Study

Thanks for the Bible study on Acts by Donna Herzfeldt-Kamprath. This is the best study I've seen in this magazine [and its predecessor] since my involvement with them in 1971. It is reverent toward the Scripture and open to the Holy Spirit as a real person who is a manifestation of the true and living God.

Ingrid Hoper—Osceola, Nebraska

I am writing concerning the Bible studies in *LWT*. I would like to see all the information in one place. It is very difficult and confusing to try and use three different pieces of material. Besides, it is another cost to purchase these. Hope a change can be made in the future.

Winnefred M. Lubmann—Blue Earth, Minnesota

Many readers expressed similar thoughts. Some changes will be evident in this new format. More changes will begin with the 2002 study.—Eds.

Reactions to Gwen Sayler's Article

Thank you, thank you, thank you for Gwen Sayler's article titled "My journey isn't over." The issue over ordaining homosexuals is very difficult, especially since I have friends on both sides of the issue. Thank you for encouraging more dialogue on this issue.

Jennifer L. Williams—Kannapolis, North Carolina

I grieve with Ms. Sayler's decision that she needs to remain celibate. Perhaps her brave article will help us begin to understand the fallacy of this demand. I look forward to further such commentaries that will assist our understanding and open discussion.

Mary F. Bergland—Winona, Minnesota

I am upset and disappointed because of [Gwen Sayler's] article. I do not understand why you felt it was necessary to include this in your magazine.

Rev. Thomas R. Hagen—Newell, Iowa

Send letters to: Letters to the Editor, *Lutheran Woman Today*, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4183; email to: lwt@elca.org. Please include your name, city, and state on all correspondence. *LWT* publishes letters representative of those received on a given subject. Letters may be edited for space. Letters must be signed, but requests for anonymity will be honored if requested.

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Executive Editor Barbara Ruckoldt

Editor Nancy Goldberger

Managing Editor Deb Bogaert

Production Editor James Satter

Editorial Assistant Beth McBride

Cover Photo Sean Kernan

Art Direction On Track Visual Communications



GIVE US THIS DAY

Prayer at My Kitchen Counter

by Marj Leegard

FATHER IN HEAVEN, FOR THE MOMENT, THIS IS MY PLACE OF PRAYER. FOR JESUS' SAKE, ACCEPT MY PRAYERS AT THE COUNTER.

Today there is such bounty. I have made more than two people need. It would be a wonderful day for a visitor; if one should happen by, or two or three, I could feed them well! That would make me feel competent and beneficent, as if every day we had such preparations for a meal.

God, you do not wait until I accidentally stop by. You invite. Today I will invite. Tomorrow I will carry and share. In Jesus' name I am called, and in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Creator of sun and wheat and rain and yeast, thank you for calling me to be creator of bread by using gifts you have given. God, I pray with the first cups of flour, the honey and the raisins, give this bread fragrance and life-giving sustenance. I give you thanks and praise as I put the risen loaves in the oven. When the brown, crisp loaves are turned out to cool, I am so filled with your gifts of love and bounty and everyday walking together that I must sing, "Praise the Lord!"

Father, give us the gift of everyday gratitude as you have given us all of creation and all of our days. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Heavenly Father, the counter is bare today. I am bound to this wheelchair with my leg encased in straps and steel. There are only the makings, the possibilities. I can't reach easily to cook and bake.

Why the fall? Why the pain? Where is the gift when the counter is bare? Shall I be still and listen? Jerome comes with a big knife and the board. "What shall I chop today?" he asks, and with a flourish onions and peppers become fragrance for a meal. My circle members knock at my door with cookies and zucchini bread. My own deprivation becomes heavy with your love. My emptiness becomes filled.

Thank you, God, for stillness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

God, today the counter gleams. No clove of garlic waiting for a home. No slice of lemon too good to throw away. Today the cleaning lady comes!

For 14 days we drop things where convenience suggests, for on the 15th day Julie sweeps away the traces of haste. Julie shows me at my counter top what you show me in my soul. Clean. Forgiven. A new beginning. Even as I declare in my silent self that this new beginning will not be sullied, will not be cluttered, will not be dirty, I know that in much less than 15 days I will have done the deeds and said the words and left the clutter again. Julie will come and sweetly clean and polish and make things right.

Savior, Lord Jesus, you have come, are now present, and will be ever near. With contrite heart I pray, make me clean again. In Jesus' name. Amen.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



MOTHERING SEASONS

Spiritual Parenting

by Kirsi Stjerna

CHILDREN ARE SPIRITUAL LONG BEFORE THEY BECOME RELIGIOUS. THEY LEARN RELIGION AS THEY GROW, BUT THEY ARE BORN WITH A SENSE OF THE SPIRITUAL.

Jesus knew this. He called on his listeners to have the faith of a child. He connected with children, who are authentic, loving, and spirited by nature. And he clearly opposed empty religiosity that threatened to replace authentic faith, the power of love, and the work of the Spirit.

Our children possess an amazing ability to love utterly and unconditionally. We naturally want to foster that passion and ability. We teach them our religious ways and hope that they connect within the continuum of Christians in search of God and godly living.

Religious community gives spirituality nourishment and direction. Children, like adults, connect with their peers and practice relating to the world in a safe place supported by shared values and prayer to the same Spirit of God that works in all of us in mysterious ways.

My children's identity as Lutherans comes as much from their church home as from their parents. They are hungry for authentic connection, which nourishes them more than any custom or dogma. As a parent, I also desire the support of a spiritual circle of friends who share concerns in the sacred task of spiritual parenting.

Thus I bring my children to church on Sunday mornings, even if it means heroic efforts to be there on time, exhaustive entertaining through the sermon, and chasing after squealing toddlers through the coffee hour. It is worth it. Kristian's loud "amens" and Kiki's ability to sit through worship are huge milestones. I rejoice in their evolving bonds of fellowship and am forever grateful for their Sunday school teachers.

Spiritual parenting wouldn't be the same without the sacraments. To know that our children have been baptized into the community of God and God's care brings great comfort. We bring our children to the communion table with the assurance that with their sticky hands they receive the gift of God in the bread they eagerly munch—just as they receive a heavenly wash in baptism with no effort of their own, wrapped in the blanket of our Christian faith and fellowship. What a great start for a spiritual journey with our children, a journey where we learn as much as our children do of the ways of the Spirit. Just as we teach our children the ways of the religion, they can remind us of the Spirit.

Kirsi Stjerna is assistant professor of Reformation church history at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Penn.

The Sounds

by Barbara Reckling

When writing about prayer, Saint Jane Chantal says, “More is accomplished by listening than by talking. Let us leave to God the decisions as to what shall be said. God speaks to the heart when the heart is recollected.” In our busy days with schedules and date books, it is often difficult to let loose of our preoccupations and listen to God.

In wordless prayer, we are allowed to let go of distractions and begin on a spiritual journey that places us directly in the presence of God. The object of prayer is to be in union with God. The awareness of God’s love is much like an embrace that allows us in turn to embrace creation, knowing that we are all cradled in the Creator’s loving arms.

In silent prayer we slow down and stop our inner dialogue. Our hearts are brought in tune with God. It is within this silence that we experience the essential aspects of God’s joy and beauty. The ancient Desert Fathers, in striving for a life of continuous prayer, would use simple repetitive phrases of scripture throughout their daily routines. Eventually they experienced the presence of God in their hearts, and they themselves became a living prayer. When the mantras fell away, they were left with only the presence of God.

Through our silence we can develop a loving relationship with a God who transcends all our understanding. Many times we reach out to God in prayer when we feel powerless, when we have reached our human limits. Paul reminds us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This invitation does not mean we can make God come to us; God is always in relationship with his creation. Prayer, however, is a free gift to us; and through this gift—when we reach out to God—we are pulled away from self-preoccupation. There is a new awakening that creates an intimacy with God. Through this relationship and intimacy we are drawn to accept our own reality.

In silent prayer
we slow down
and stop our
inner dialogue.
Our hearts are
brought in tune
with God.

of Silence



A few years ago I was at a conference in New Mexico. A group of us decided to go to a local ranch to go horseback riding on the mesas. It was late afternoon, and the sun was shimmering across the landscape, exposing the beauty of the flat-topped hills and valleys below. Riding on that graceful animal and engulfed in such splendor, I was struck with complete awe at the grandeur of God's creation. There are no words to describe what I was feeling, but I know I truly felt a connection with God and creation. Because there were no words to describe my feelings and no prayer that would be adequate, I simply let the experience become my prayer.

It is at times like these that we feel the omnipotence of our creator. We feel interconnected with God and our universe. Genesis 1:31 says, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." In silence and in stillness we create space where we can experience the tenderness of God in our inner being. Self-important images are lost, and we immerse ourselves in oneness with our creator. Our silence becomes our form of worship.

Our God is a silent God who looks into the depths of our inner selves. In silence we offer to our Lord the gift of our inner needs. God responds by giving us the capacity of understanding and acceptance of our own realities. 1 Samuel 16:7 states that "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Through the gift of silent prayer we surrender our desire to control, and we allow the Holy Spirit to pray in us and through us. There is no need to recite a list of names of those we wish to pray for, and we are not obligated to enumerate all of our needs and wants. God listens and responds to the unspoken prayers in the depths of our hearts.

In the prayer of silence, we sit in God's company. It is a place to find our center and to rest our soul. It is a place where we can empty ourselves and lose ourselves in God's love. We may find it hard to slow down while we are busy taking care of the needs of others. But here in the silence we can show ourselves as needy. In the stillness we are safe in our defenselessness because we are in the presence of our Lord. In stillness and silence God hears our wordless prayers. When we return to our busyness, we see the world in a different light because we have experienced the mystery of God's presence.

In our wordless prayers we find the mystery of God, and it is in our silence that God hears our whispers of thanksgiving and praise. Within the depth of our silence, God sees our inner being and knows our sorrows and need. It is in the silence of prayer that we encounter God.

In silence and
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inner being.

Barbara Reckling is a graduate of the master of divinity program at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



SURRENDER OF self

by Bryan Cones

Books about prayer and spirituality have flooded bookstores in recent years. The majority of these books are filled with ideas to help you enrich your spirituality, but they don't start from the perspective of a particular faith tradition. Rather, they seek to help readers find their own unique experience of prayer and their own personal connection to the divine, however they may define what that is.

The popularity of these books reflects the great hunger for spirituality that many people have. To be sure, many Christians have found new ways to seek the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet we Christians have a prayer library of our own—the books of the Bible make up its first volumes, and our modern books of worship are the most recent additions. But unlike

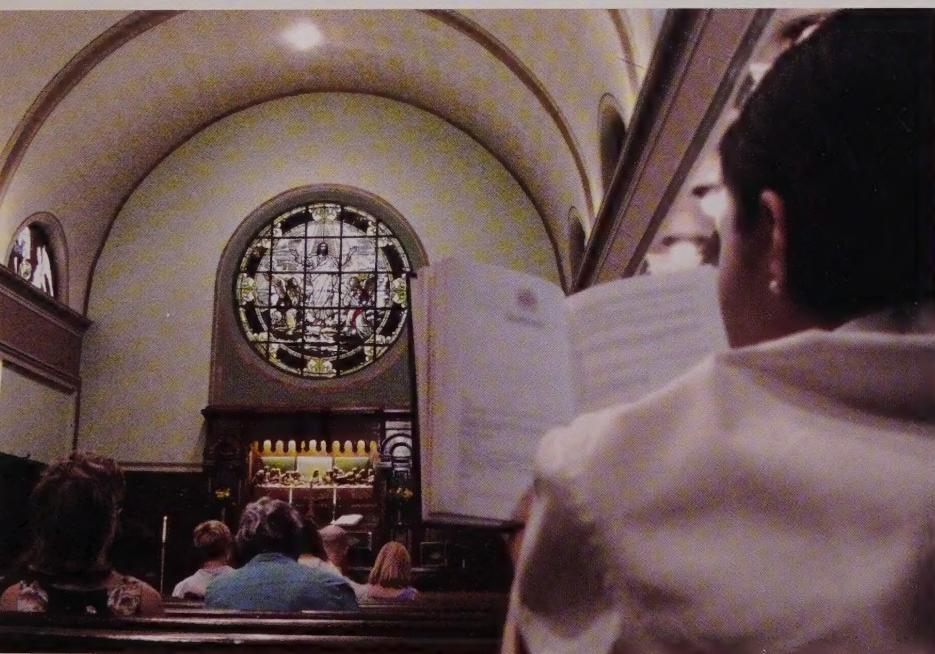
we gather on Sunday to hear God's word and to offer God praise and thanksgiving.

In one sense, the common prayers of our worship are prayers we know by heart: the Lord's Prayer, the Nicene Creed, and perhaps a psalm or two. Many of us have memorized favorite Scripture passages to keep us going in hard times and accompany us in good times as well.

confirmation, prayers for marriages and the birth of children, prayers for times of grief and death.

These prayers ask us to join our voices with many others to make a single voice, offering one great prayer. They ask us to express sorrow for sin even when we aren't feeling particularly remorseful. They ask us to cry out in joy and praise even when we are sad. They ask us to give thanks to God even when we may see little reason to do so. In the end, they ask us to surrender to something greater than ourselves, and in doing so to make just a little "louder" the one prayer of the Christian Church in every time and place.

There's a lot to this surrender. It's a surrender of time—we don't schedule the Sunday service but show up at the appointed hour. It's a surrender of body—we don't decide when to stand or sit but join the rest of the congregation in its posture of prayer. It's a surrender of speech—we don't choose the words of the prayer but pray in the words given. It's a surrender of hearing—we don't choose the lessons proclaimed but hear the ones designated for that day. It's a surrender of heart—we don't offer our needs and hopes alone but pray for the needs of the whole world. In short, it's a surrender of self, a surrender to community and to



many of the prayer books on the market today, our library asks something more of us.

Rather than seek our own unique prayer, it asks us to join ourselves to a prayer already given, a prayer entrusted to us when we were baptized, a prayer offered by a community of faith. We join ourselves to this prayer of the church most fully when

But our common prayers are known not just by our individual hearts but also by our common heart—and our common heart embraces more than just a few favorite prayers. The prayers of the church's heart include Great Thanksgivings prayed over bread and wine, words of praise for the morning and supplication for the evening, prayers for baptism and

tradition, a surrender to praying as a member of the body of Christ. Perhaps most importantly, it's a surrender to mission, for we gather on Sunday not just to praise God with voices and hearts but to be transformed to praise God by serving the least of God's children.

But the point of this surrender is not self-denial. We don't join ourselves to the church's prayer to become less of who we are, to

what we find there, and to be able to hear it more deeply when it is proclaimed on Sunday.

We practice when we bless God and give thanks for our food before or after a meal, which prepares us to join the church's Great Thanksgiving to God over our common food of bread and wine. We practice when we dedicate the work of our hands to God in the morning and entrust ourselves to

When we gather with spouses and children or larger groups of friends, we rehearse our gathering with the larger community, who are not friends or family by kinship or common interest, but brothers and sisters to us by our faith in Christ and by our baptism. In the end, of course, our weekday practicing and our Sunday praying are not distinct. Rather, they flow to and from each other.

In short, it's a surrender of self, a surrender to community and to tradition, a surrender to praying as a member of the body of Christ.

deny our own needs, hopes, or experience of God. On the contrary, we surrender to become even more who we were created to be when we were baptized into Christ Jesus: people of praise and thanksgiving, people of hope and life, people of peace and justice. We surrender to be remade more completely in the image of Christ.

This kind of effort takes practice, as does anything worth doing well, and that practice often takes place outside the Sunday gathering: in homes, in nature, in the car, and even at work. We practice by taking a volume from our library of prayer and exploring it on our own. Reading Scripture certainly qualifies. It allows us to slowly take in the Word of our faith, to be nourished more and more by

God's hands at night. We practice when we recite the Lord's Prayer or the Nicene Creed, which Christians throughout the centuries have prayed as a way of praising God during the day. We practice when we anticipate the fullness of God's reign by seeking equality and justice for all. And, whether we realize it or not, we practice together.

As we grow in the practice of prayer in our lives as individuals and families, we expand our ability to pray as members of the gathered church. As we grow as individuals, as families, and as Bible study groups in the grace and mercy of God, we make the Sunday assembly a more radiant sign of that same grace and mercy, a more radiant sign of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. More and more, the library of prayer that is the church's heart becomes the prayer of our own hearts, the prayer we pray by heart.



Bryan Cones is an author and editor at Liturgy Training Publications. His most recent book is *Daily Prayer 2002*, a collection of daily readings and prayers inspired by the church year.

Faith Foundations



Anne Berry-Dunlap is senior vice president of operations for the Longaberger Company, which specializes in baskets, pottery, and other items for home decor. This position involves running the supply chain of manufacturing, materials management, distribution, sales operations and human resources.

Anne grew up in Midland, Michigan, as a member of Trinity Lutheran Church. She earned a bachelor's degree in computer science with an emphasis in mathematics from Capital University, a Lutheran-affiliated university in Ohio. Her original plan was to be a secondary education teacher.

LWT recently engaged Anne in a discussion about how her faith has influenced her life's path and how it continues to shape her perspectives on work.

What were some factors that helped you decide to attend Capital, a Lutheran University?

My father and I went on trips to pick out my college. This was a very memorable time with him; we had many serious conversations about my future, and the focus was on me. Capital was my most memorable trip, plus both my mother and father attended Capital and had fond memories. I spent a weekend on campus while my father spent time with a former roommate. It was great fun. I also attended a math class, and it was very impressive. At the other schools, I would have known classmates from high school, but I was ready for a change.

I also played sports in junior high and high school and was looking for a college where I could continue to do that. I played varsity tennis for three years at Capital.

As you reflect on that experience now, would you encourage others to pursue an education at a faith-based institution?

Yes, though at first this scared me off. But my religion class was focused on ethics and standing firm on what you believe in. I really transitioned in the four years at Capital. I was able to focus less on peer pressure and more on accepting my beliefs and values and gaining confidence.

Were there habits and routines in your life growing up or as a young adult that helped shape who you are today?

I learned responsibilities at an early age. I was encouraged to make decisions and to try new things out of my comfort zone. I learned about sharing first with my family, where I was the middle child with an older brother and a younger sister. When I was in elementary school, I was a member of an AAU girls' track and cross-country team. We ran in meets with girls from the Midwest, East, and Canada. Some of them stayed at our house when they came to compete, and this was a wonderful early lesson in diversity.

Can you share an event that happened for you, in your formative years, that has made an impact upon your attitudes toward life?

During high school I worked as a candy striper at Midland Hospital. My responsibilities were to pick up menus and smile or chat with the patients. I learned about sickness and how not to take your health for granted. Spending time on the oncology ward gave me an appreciation for how blessed I was. And that was important, since I was going through major growing pains and feeling inadequate.

When I returned from college on one of my summer breaks, about five years after my last days as a candy striper, I was sitting outside with my friends at a restaurant, and a young man approached me: "I recognize your smile. I considered you an angel sent to me as I lay in the hospital. You spread sunshine and made a day that was unbearable brighter."

He had been in the hospital for food poisoning. He was my brother's age, about four years older than me.

He felt so miserable, yet he will never forget how I changed that, even though I just sat with him and talked, and then we filled out his menu together. He couldn't think about food—it was the worst topic possible—but was willing to fill out the menu, since he wanted me to stay and talk: "Do you realize your smile has healing powers?" I had no idea that I could have that type of affect on anyone.

Since then, I have never underestimated the power of caring. It wasn't my smile—it was the fact that someone noticed, shared a story, and cared. I live my every-day life differently because of that experience.

How has this impacted your work life? Can you discuss how it gave better insight to a work dilemma or other situation, or assisted you in making a decision?

It educated me on how to deal with people, to be supportive and sincere. A kind word or a note often builds rapport and helps ease the stress between home and work. It is important to deal with a person as a whole individual and be aware and considerate of their home life. I always say projects or issues come and go, yet the person and the relationship you develop needs to be secured for the long term.

What are three important things that should be part of a young woman's faith-influenced foundation of ethics?

1. Improve on your self-worth. Set time for learning and developing, and then set time to be pampered and feel good about your progress and improvements. You are no good to the world around you if you are not growing and developing.

2. Be involved in your community, and set a good example for others. My daughters are encouraged to do a good deed each day. At the ages of 4 and 6, they know that a good deed is doing something nice for someone when they weren't expecting it. They have expressed this by doing things like baking cookies, picking up a tipped-over trash can, and giving food to the local pantry.
3. Surround yourself with diversity. My family has enjoyed several meals at the home of a friend who is a Hasidic Jew. We recently had friends over for dinner who are Muslim. I ask questions, and I don't let differences mean strangeness. In Ohio, I find diversity at times to be a challenge. But I also find that every person has values and experiences that are different from mine, and those are what need to be explored—what is it like to walk in their shoes and how difficult is it to follow their convictions. I look for ways to ensure they find peace.

How does your faith foundation come into play with other decisions you make?

I live by the motto "Do the right thing." I happen to be a people person and can get people motivated, and so if I am passionate about a cause, it usually gets done. I count my blessings every day and realize that I have an opportunity and a responsibility to make a difference in my community. I give freely to charitable organizations, and more importantly I give my time. I am an advisory board member to Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Licking and Perry County, as well as a Big Sister to a 13-year-old girl.

If you were to select one woman who had the greatest impact on you, who would it be?

My mother, Sally Berry, because of the following: She can make a positive out of any experience. She is very optimistic about life, and it is contagious. She gets things done, is very organized, and has extreme delegation skills (which are great, until she tries to delegate to me). She pushed me to experience things that I would not have explored myself: candy-striping, golf, etc. She created an environment of acceptance where I knew it was okay to make mistakes, and I knew there was unconditional love.

What else would you like to say about the role of faith in life?

I live every day to the fullest as if it might be my last. I consider myself a Christian who wants to make an impact with her life. Anything I take on, I do with passion.

I get real turned off by fanatical religious individuals who stand behind their beliefs to persecute others. This world is a better place because of differences. How can one group feel they are so righteous as to be superior to others? Religious wars and violent crimes perpetrated due to someone's beliefs or upbringing affect me. If I could impact the world in one way, it would be to make it a more peaceful place.

I feel okay about my charitable focus; I do see that I am making a difference in a localized way. However, I would like to turn my energies toward philanthropic endeavors, where I get to solve the root cause of the issues and prevent problems. That would be exciting!

TALKING, THINKING, AND RESTING WITH GOD

by Andrew Yee



UPON MEETING THE BUDDHA, the vain and boastful personality of the monkey-god surfaces, with the need to prove he is just as powerful as the great Buddha. Seeing no rise out of the Buddha from his initial tricks, the monkey-god leaps into the air so high that he disappears for five days. Upon his return, he struts around the Buddha, sure that the Buddha would ask where he had been. But there is still no rise from the Buddha.

Unable to stand it any longer, the monkey-god decides to tell the Buddha about his leap to the outer limits of the universe. Still nothing! The monkey-god explains further how he saw five huge granite pillars there, extending up until the tops of them were lost in the clouds. The Buddha does answer this time, but without words. With a silent gesture, he raises his hand before the monkey-god's eyes. The monkey-god's eyes draw toward the Buddha's fingers, which he sees are not fingers but five huge granite pillars extending up until the tops of them are lost in the clouds!

The well-known Christian preacher and writer Frederick Buechner often uses this story from the Buddhist tradition. He says that he envies the ability of Buddhist monks to experience a connection with God that is not capable of being captured with words, that has as much to do with silence as with anything else. Even though God acts in time and space, and we have words to deal with things that occupy time and space, the existence of God for the Buddhist monk extends beyond these categories.

If God cannot be contained in our religious boxes, then our ways to connect with God may need to be just as wide. A reflection on the distinctions between prayer, meditation, and contemplation might not only start this widening process, but might also invite us to aim for a balance that is not easily attained when they are all lumped together. If we can intentionally build in time for these varied methods with their unique gifts, our personal and corporate times with God might also be revived.

These three labels are not as important as the varied methods they point to, so there is no need to see this discussion as definitive. After all, if God exists beyond our categories, there may also be many more helpful methods to consider. Our congregation offers these three in our newcomers class because we believe it is a good place to start.

JESUS' EXAMPLE

First, let us look to Jesus for an example. He seemed intentional about having a balance of action and quiet: “he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; . . . In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:34-35).

In making the following distinctions between prayer, meditation, and contemplation, we are also invited to see how they complement each other. We must keep in mind that they all offer their own gifts; we must not think that one must be more important or more genuine than the other. Each offers God’s revelation to us in a different way.

SOME WORKING DEFINITIONS

Prayer: “talking to God.” This is a wonderful way to praise and thank God, confess burdens, offer petitions, and intercede for others.

Meditation: “thinking with God.” Our time alone with God is highlighted. Henri Nouwen uses the word *solitude*. We can use this time to center ourselves. Coaches know how important it is to center their teams before heading out into the field. It is also useful for discernment or making tough decisions.

Contemplation: “resting with God.” You may want to think of this as Jesus praying for something extremely comforting for you, especially when you’re feeling in a pit. For many of us, this last category may be the most difficult of the three. It requires trust and the ability to let go, even when we might be feeling most vulnerable.

Can you begin to see the distinctions and the wide range of gifts that come to light in each? Have you begun to discern how our role is different among the three? In prayer, since we usually bring the agenda, we are in control, active, and intentional actors. At the other end, in contemplation, we come with no agenda, assume a passive and receptive role, and are vulnerable and ready to be acted upon. Meditation can fall in the middle, as we explore and discover God’s agenda, intentions, and gifts; interactively and consciously involved, the process is shared.

VIEW OF GOD

Our view of God is different among them, too. In praying, God tends to be more out there; we might use the word *transcendent*. When meditating, God is present in the dreams of our consciousness; think of putting on the mind of Christ. We might use the word *imminent*. During contemplation, we find God at the center of our personhood, experiencing God in something as simple as concentrating on our breathing. Here we might think of the word *incarnated*.

Likewise, what we come away with may be different, too. Talking to God in prayer, we seek answers, forgiveness, guidance, comfort, inspiration, and empowerment. Thinking with God in meditation, we enter a process of letting go; open to new vision and receiving guidance, we are led to resolutions. Resting with God in contemplation, the desire is to be at peace and an at-one-ness with God; we seek harmony, empowerment, and energy.

BALANCING

Having examined these distinctions, are you able to determine if the ways

that you connect with God are balanced? What might you be challenged to try? As you continue to grow in faith, how can you be intentional about connecting with God in all of these ways? Can we say that our connection with God wouldn't feel complete if we didn't connect with God in all of these ways?

While I find that distinctions help me clarify where I might be in the mix, the process of bringing them back together also proves helpful. For instance, how do we enhance our "prayer" life so that it might incorporate all of these different methods?

Books such as *Whole Prayer: Speaking and Listening to God*, by Walter Wangerin Jr., might help. This book attempts to restore a wholeness in our prayer life by being intentional about four parts in our communication: (1) we speak; (2) God listens; (3) God speaks; and (4) we listen. Nouwen's *With Open Hands* offers a similar challenge. Both are excellent in encouraging the reader to enhance journeys that may have already started.

PRAYING THE GOSPELS

Another area we touch upon is how to pray the Gospels; it is an invitation to a contemplative experience with Jesus in the Gospels. Finding an appropriate posture and taking time to center is important. We can then begin to find a particular resting place in a particular passage so that in that place we can: hunger for Jesus to come; let Jesus really be there; truly listen to Jesus because we

come with no agenda; let Jesus love, speak, hold, console, forgive, and strengthen. It is an approach to the Gospels that much of our intellectual and action-oriented

culture does not spend much time doing.

Some who read this article may say, "Good point," then go on with life as usual. But I urge you to try something new you may have learned today. Remember that God extends far beyond any words that I might be able to write here; your experience with a God who really wants to be alive in you is what counts. May God continue to bless you!

Andrew Yee is pastor at Christ the Servant Lutheran Church in Bellingham, Wash.

THINKING WITH GOD IN MEDITATION, WE ENTER A PROCESS OF LETTING GO...



The Unimaginable Becomes Reality

by Jonathan P. Strandjord

JUST OVER 30 YEARS AGO, LUTHERANS IN AMERICA BEGAN ORDAINING WOMEN FOR WORD AND SACRAMENT MINISTRY. FOR CENTURIES, WOMEN COULD NOT BE ORDAINED IN OUR CHURCHES, PERIOD. THEN THE RULE CHANGED, AND WHAT HAD BEEN UNIMAGINABLE BECAME REALITY.

What made it possible for the church to do a 180-degree turn? The change was not as abrupt as it seemed. Women have played a wide variety of important roles in the church since the very beginning. The biblical witness is thick with the stories of women who served God's mission—sometimes inside culturally accepted roles and expectations, but often outside them. Church history tells again and again of women of faith who took the lead to see that the ministry of the gospel was not only sustained but advanced into new territory.

In the United States, Lutheran women have not been shy. Sixty years ago, when my parents were children, men and women sat on different sides of the sanctuary during worship in a significant number of Lutheran congregations. In those congregations and many others, women were not allowed to sit on the church council. However, they were not passive spectators. Women have been responsible for providing important leadership in all aspects of congregational work.

Because women had been playing key roles for years—in many places performing the same tasks as their ordained male coworkers—and because congregations came to recognize the leadership gifts women offered, the passing years saw more and more women serving on church councils and in other positions of church leadership. This slowly opened the church's eyes and ears to the full witness of Scripture, in which women are the first to proclaim the resurrection and in which the apostle Paul corresponds with women he recognizes as leaders of congregations. The Lutherans' experience of the power of God in the ministry of women made their ordination a faithful next step.

It was hardly the last step. In the 30 years since, there have been many more changes—perhaps less dramatic but by no means less significant. Women have become bishops, synodical and churchwide officers, and Lutheran Social Service administrators. Every ELCA seminary has women faculty members (including two deans). One of our church colleges now has a woman president. And, in timely celebration of the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women, the numbers of women and men preparing at our seminaries for ordained ministry is, for the very first time, equal.

Women pastors are no longer novel and rare, as they still were when my wife and I were

ordained in 1979. The journey is not over; God isn't through with us yet. But it is worth pausing on the journey to give thanks to God for women's gifts for ministry and for the call which comes to the whole people of God.

Congregations Celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Women's Ordination

We honored Pastor Marian Marks, our spiritual leader and friend during the past five years, with a "God Box" from the members of the church. A "God Box" is a special, personal box for holding the joys, blessings, sorrows, and concerns in our lives that we must put into God's hands. It was presented to her with love and gratitude at our Daughters All Ages Banquet in May.

Carol Shurtz—Auburn, Maine

Grace Lutheran Women of the ELCA

Eighty-six women attended our Women of the ELCA celebration of the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women pastors. We held it especially to welcome our new pastor, Julie Krahn, and Yvonne Steindal, director of youth and family ministries. The meeting opened with a special heartfelt tribute to all women in ministry. We advertised the evening as a fun, relaxing good time, and it was just that. Each of the pastors gave a short bio of their life's journey, relaying humorous incidents that have happened along the way.

Eileen M. Brower—Beaver Dam, Wisconsin

First Lutheran Women of the ELCA

Our congregation celebrated women's ordination all through 2000. At our first Women of the ELCA board meeting of the year, all circles were asked to do something special for Reverend Anjanette Rist during the following months. The gifts were as varied as

our circles. Some were personal. Others furthered the ministry of God, such as with a monetary gift to Lutheran Volunteer Corps (since Pastor Anjanette had served with this group). The final gift was sponsorship of one of our church's radio broadcasts; it was dedicated to the ordination of all the women in our church. A special gift was a baby quilt because Pastor Anjanette and her husband announced they were expecting their first baby! Another quilt, "Hour Glass," will be finished and presented to them this summer.

Jean Schneck—Fremont, Nebraska

First Lutheran Women of the ELCA

Our Women of the ELCA had a potluck salad lunch to celebrate our pastor, Donna Herzfeldt-Kamprath, pastor at both Hope Lutheran in Klamath Falls and Trinity Lutheran in Tulelake, California (and writer of the 2000-2001 Women of the ELCA Bible study on Acts in *LWT*), as well as Rev. Susan Champion of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Klamath Falls, Oregon. Women from all three churches were invited. Our program included prayers and poems. Also, Pastor Donna and Rev. Susan shared what it has meant to be a woman in ministry, and we had special music by Opus 6. Small gifts were presented to the two honored guests.

Helen Houston—Klamath Falls, Oregon

Hope Lutheran Women of the ELCA

Do You Have an Idea to Share?

IdeaNet is a great place to share your experiences, events, programs, and ideas. It's also a great place to pose a question to others who might have a unique perspective or solution.

Help make IdeaNet an even stronger resource for the readers of *LWT*. Use the pre-addressed card bound into this issue to send in your submissions. Get caught up in the 'Net today!



What Makes Me a Person of Faith?

by NaTasha Henry

Is it how often I read my Bible, how often I pray, or the way I live my life in general?

I am not perfect, but I try my best every day to be a good person. Sometimes I fail at being what I believe God wants me to be—a good Christian who tries to set good examples. But I try to follow my instincts, and they are grounded in the way I was raised.

My family did not go to church much when I was very young. I went to a Catholic school from kindergarten through third grade. There I heard that a person can spend time in purgatory on their way to heaven, and that people prayed for those in purgatory so they could get to heaven.

I attended a Baptist school during fifth and sixth grade. We spent a lot of time reading the book of Revelation in our religion class. With our readings, our teacher explained to us that Jesus was going to come back. When he did return, there would be a rapture.

As I started to think for myself about what I was being taught, I realized there were some things I did not necessarily agree with. I decided to listen to what my mother and grandmother had taught me about these things. They had told me that they believed there was a God because all the things we have and all that is around us would not be possible without someone creating it. Who could love us so much to give us so much even though we do not deserve it?

Once I reached seventh grade, I started to attend a Lutheran school. Even though I didn't know much about the denomination, I was welcomed with open arms. At first I started going to Sunday school and church because my mom made me. But after I completed my first year at this school, I wanted to continue going to church. It felt right to me. The people were nice, and it felt like a family.

After my confirmation at the end of eighth grade, I was asked to help teach kindergarten Sunday school. I accepted, but I wasn't certain what I could offer. Dfalie Hudson was the kindergarten teacher, and I was to assist her. She was petite, her voice was quiet, and she had a peacefulness about her. Although I never told her, I admired and looked up to her. Even though she was ill, she would smile no matter what the circumstances. I never heard her complain or question God about being sick.

During my sophomore year in high school, Dfalie passed away. On the day of her funeral, I did not even get in the door before I began to cry. My mother could not believe it. I had never cried at a funeral, but now I could not stop the tears. I did not want to look at her one last time. I wanted to remember her the way she was: a happy, intelligent, caring person. And I wanted to know why God had taken away this wonderful person. I am still not sure I understand why things like that happen, but I think it served as a wake-up call for me. Now I realize that God has called me to help people live better lives and get closer to him.

I kept on teaching Sunday school until I graduated from high school. Now, away at college, I am beginning to understand more of what the world is like. There are times when the world can be cruel. People tell me I have a strong faith and I am a good Christian, but I'm not sure I always see it. What do others see that I don't?

I think I was at times so busy looking at my faults and failures that I was not seeing the good things that have come from my faith. I will continue to pray for the world to get better. I will pray for a world without racism and discrimination. and I'll ask God to help me resist temptations. I do realize it may be a long time before all these things come to pass, but I'll continue to pray.

Life isn't always easy for a young college student. Being away from home can make you feel like you are an adult. I have to wash my own clothes, feed myself, and do all the things my mother and grandmother once did for me. Sure, I have more freedom now, but this is the time when I lean on all the things I've been taught since I was a young girl. I guess I

The religious beliefs that I have and the ability to brighten someone's day makes me a person of faith.

have not done so badly. I was put here for a reason, and I intend to do my part by helping others and serving as an instrument of God.

When the time comes for me to reflect on my life, I only hope that I have pleased God. So to answer my question, what makes me a person of faith, I say it is all the things I have been through. The things I see and believe to be real and true. The religious beliefs that I have and the ability to brighten someone's day makes me a person of faith. It does not matter how many scripture passages I memorize, how much I go to church, or how often I pray. What matters is God loves me, accepts me for who I am, and forgives me. I can still have hope and faith when things are not going well because I know God is the only answer.

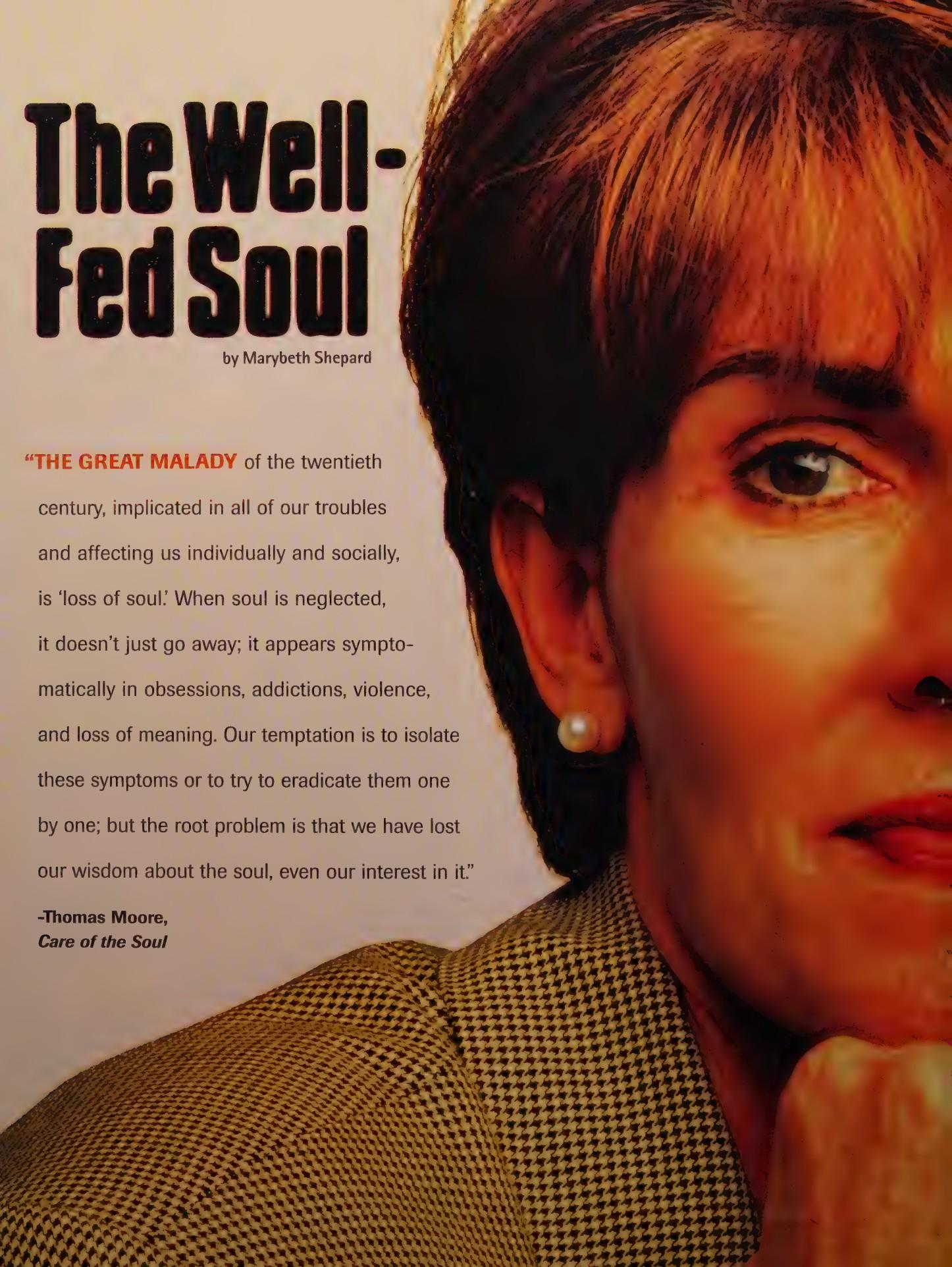
NaTasha Henry is an education major at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Ind.

The Well-Fed Soul

by Marybeth Shepard

"**THE GREAT MALADY** of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is 'loss of soul.' When soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or to try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost our wisdom about the soul, even our interest in it."

-Thomas Moore,
Care of the Soul



A new interest in “soul work” has been awakening over the past few years. From the gratitude journals and “Remembering Your Spirit” segments on Oprah to the popularity of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books to the new wave of enthusiasm for yoga, our culture seems to be on a search to get in touch with the deeper, more meaningful parts of ourselves. Let’s explore together what it all means and how it relates to faith and religion.

First, what do we mean by spirituality? Mention the term and you may evoke thoughts of angels, séances, channeling, and New Age philosophy. Many definitions of spirituality view it in terms of contrast, as opposed to worldly, bodily, or temporal matters. But this seems to discount the value of everyday experience; most of us do not live in remote religious communities, and our spiritual lives are not in a vacuum, separate from the other parts of our lives. Our spirituality is closely connected to—rather than divorced from—our everyday thoughts and activities.

For this discussion, we will take spirituality to mean the quality of being concerned with the development of the Spirit, of being spirit-minded. The word *spirit* derives from the term for breath in Hebrew and refers to the “essential human capacity

to receive and transmit the life of God, our unlimited openness to being, life, and conscious relationship” (Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality*). Thus, our spirit actually reflects our beliefs about God, about creation, about divine and human nature, and about life and death.

Spirituality, then, can be thought of as a search for sacredness amid the ordinary, a longing for communion with our creator, a quest for meaning, and a desire to tackle questions such as “Who am I?” and “Do I make a difference?” Spirituality is “a move to interiority, a passage to the deeper places where we discover our authenticity, ...evaluate our goals, hopes, dreams, beliefs, behaviors, experiences—all that has marked us and contributed to the person we have become—and we ask ourselves: ‘Is this the person I want to be in the future?’” (Joyce Rupp, *Dear Heart, Come Home*).

Spirituality is expressed differently in different people. It also can be expressed in different ways within ourselves at different times in our lives. Thomas Moore explains that changes in our bodies or our life situations may grab our attention as our souls seek to teach us lessons about loss, fate, time, nature, mortality, and what is truly important in life.

Approaches to spirituality can also differ based on gender or culture. For women, spirituality often is connected to the idea of relationship, whereas for men, spirituality tends to be more related to a set of ethical rules for life. Eastern philosophy may refer to spiritual work in terms of energy centers where vital life forces intersect rather than in terms of soul.

The Link to Religion

For many of us, our spirituality has always been closely linked to our religion. Our souls have been nourished through years of participation in traditional rituals such as weekly worship services.

Ritual participation allows us to reconnect with the practices of our ancestors and to communally experience spirit-lifting emotions such as joy and awe. Moore again points out that “formal teachings, rites, and stories of religions provide an inexhaustible source for [inspiration and] reflection on the mysteries of the soul.”

But is it possible to be spiritual without being religious? Most of us know people without any formal religious connections whom we would classify as “spiritual.” I believe it is the approach people take to conducting their life’s business that makes them spiritual. Statements such as “I am spiritual, but not religious” still imply, at their core, a moral and ethical

I believe it is the approach people take to conducting their life’s business that makes them spiritual.

approach to life. The way that a person who claims to be spiritual treats others and the environment most likely reflects a belief about being created and sustained by a loving God. Likewise, it is possible to be religious but not spiritual. We all know people who attend weekly religious services but who live the rest of their lives in an “unspiritual” way.

For many of us, though, our spirituality is connected to our religion. Our weekly worship experiences reaffirm the need to care for our spirit, and these experiences may provide the starting point for further spiritual development. We can use our faith and our religion to guide our spiritual development.

Take the time to consider the following questions: Which aspects of traditional religious services speak to you most? Why? Which parts seem to move your soul more than others? Which parts would you like to make more consciously a part of your daily life? The answers to these questions can help us to create new rituals and new approaches to our daily living that can become integral parts of our day-to-day habits and routines.

One person, longing for the connectedness of a communal experience, may seek out a meditation group or religious study group. Another person, craving quiet, solitude, and a time for centering in order to experience the presence of the divine, may decide to designate a “sacred space” at home for quiet prayer time, possibly using candles and other religious images to help connect the new rituals with the traditional ones.

Sources of Inspiration for Spiritual Growth

But even if we recognize the importance of our spiritual development, what will inspire us to take action, to become more spirit-minded? For some people, reaching middle age brings an increased awareness of one’s own mortality, and this provides the inspiration. A trip home and a return to the community or church of our youth may rekindle our spirit. We may experience a particularly “spirit-filled” or mystical moment. Perhaps a crisis will spark the need to examine our lives and make changes. We may see spiritual development as a way of renewing and revisioning our relationship with God.

For others, the inspiration for spiritual growth will come from a realization that something has been missing, that the hectic pace of modern life has resulted in losing touch with centeredness, with the Creator, and with the creative within. Spiritual

development may be a way to remember our most sacred dreams and help them become reality.

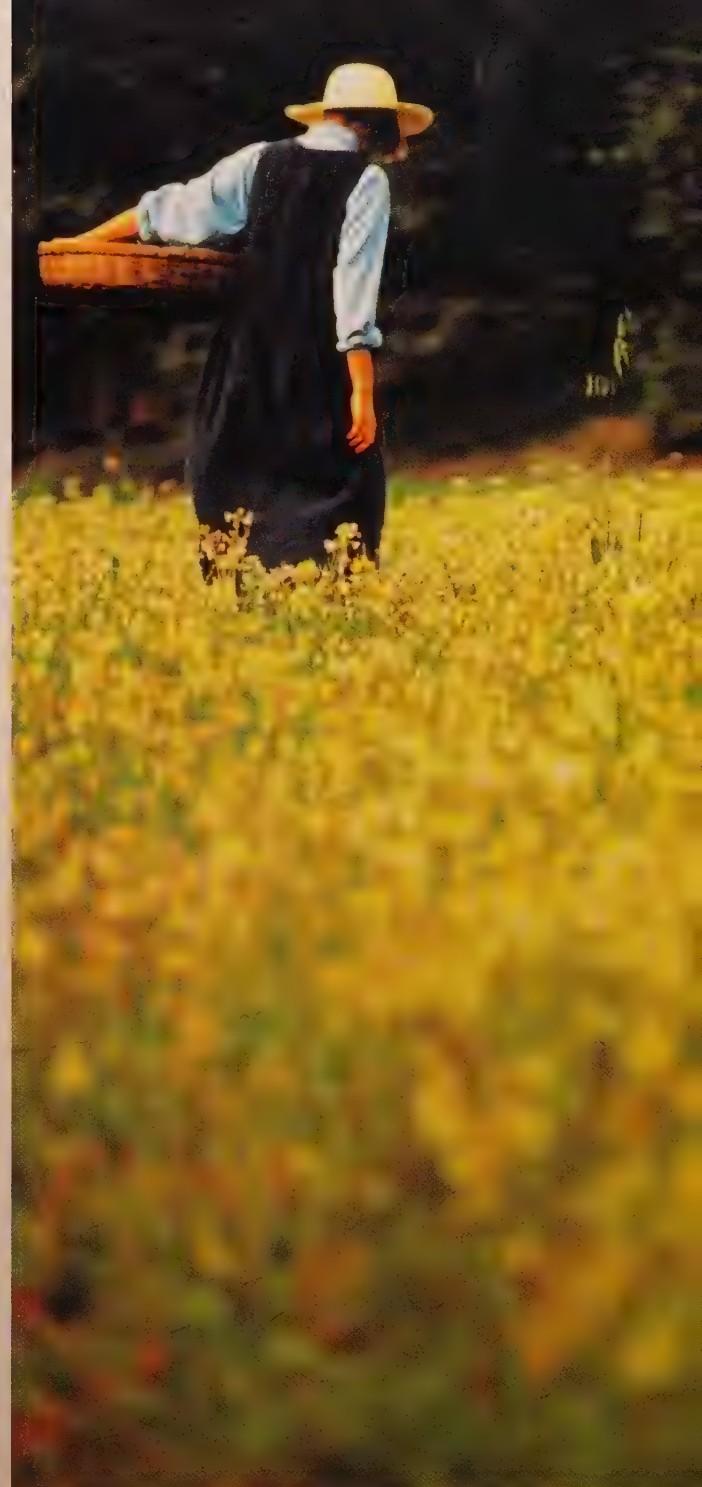
Feeding the Soul

Whatever our inspiration, serving the spiritual needs is not something we can afford to neglect. Our souls need to be nourished by a spiritual life in the same way that our bodies need food. Moore tells us again that “spirituality need not be grandiose in its ceremonials . . . but spirituality does demand attention, mindfulness, regularity, and devotion. It asks for some small measure of withdrawal from a world set up to ignore soul.”

The spiritual journey can begin with simple things, such as deliberately setting aside time for our soul-work and consciously making an effort to appreciate the sacred in the most ordinary objects, events, and circumstances of our lives, like a baby’s laugh or a mother’s smile. Our souls may be nourished through activities, such as writing our thoughts in a journal, collecting memories in a scrapbook, reading spiritually uplifting material, volunteering our time, sharing a cup of tea with a good friend, or going for a walk and seeing the flowers in bloom, then taking the time to contemplate the signs of growth and change within ourselves.

Whatever path our spiritual journey eventually follows, we must remain mindful that we are intersecting with others who are also on their own spiritual journeys. There is no “one size fits all” path to spiritual development.

In *Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul*, Laurie Waldron says, “To truly live I need to let the spirit within me be free and rejoice in its uniqueness.” Each of our spiritual journeys is indeed unique and holy. What we bring with us from our religious traditions and from our own experience will shape our development and influence what we teach future generations.



Marybeth Shepard recently served as an interim visitation pastor at United in Faith Lutheran Church in Chicago. She has a master's degree in social work from the University of Chicago and a master of divinity degree from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.



READER CALL

Do You Find Prayer Difficult?

When my father passed away, I felt very disconnected from my prayer life. In the midst of greeting distant family members, cleaning out my father's apartment, and the continued rush of memories, I felt I had no time to stop and share my thoughts with God. Nor did stopping to pray really interest me. I thought that it would require me to relive the details of his death.

It was difficult to function during that time. I had lost the ability to think clearly, and I certainly could not focus enough to have a conversation, albeit mentally, with God.

As I grieved my father's death and mourned the distance between myself and God, I also began to feel guilty about the distant relationship my father and I shared during his life. It seemed selfish and hypocritical to pray for help now.

Eventually it became clear to me that I did not have to stop and outline my feelings and prayers to God, and formalize the discussion. God would answer my "unprayers." The answers were coming before I had the chance to utter the requests.

A good example occurred at the funeral home. I was surrounded by friends, who all seemed to have the right amount of wisdom and comforting words. I realized that God allowed me to find comfort and support through them, and I am glad for that.

Audrey Burns—Tempe, Arizona

My husband was recently diagnosed with having had a stroke twice, in as many days. He's 33.

I'm not one who prays daily or gets down on my knees to pray. I believe that God knows what I'm thinking and guides my thoughts and actions. I must admit, though, that I have wondered, "What if?" What if I got down on my knees and prayed? Would it make a difference? How many more blessings could I have?

All those thoughts were in my mind as I faced my husband's mortality. One night, while he was resting, I went to the front room, knelt by the couch, and prayed like I hadn't prayed since I was a youth. I prayed, I rocked, I cried ... for so long that, just like when a baby cries for too long, my eyes got tired of crying, and I closed them and went to sleep.

The next day, the diagnosis was changed from a stroke to Bells' palsy, a temporary facial paralysis that affects 1 in 40,000 people. It is 100 percent curable and nowhere near as serious as a stroke.

I know God forgives me for not praying more regularly and doesn't get mad because I dare to pray only when in peril.

The whole process has made me reevaluate my prayer rituals, though. God answered my prayers, so now, I should be able to do what he asks of me in return. And God doesn't ask much of us, does he?

Stevie Wallace—Miami, Florida



A CONSCIENTIOUS WOMAN'S GUIDE TO INVESTING

by Trudy Brubaker

THOUSANDS OF STARFISH HAD WASHED ASHORE. A YOUNG GIRL BEGAN THROWING THEM BACK INTO THE WATER SO THEY WOULD NOT DIE. "DON'T BOTHER, DEAR," HER MOTHER SAID. "IT WON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE." THE GIRL STOPPED FOR A MOMENT AND LOOKED AT THE STARFISH IN HER HAND. "IT'LL MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THIS ONE."

In the world of socially responsible investing, one person can never "throw back all the starfish," but one person can make a difference. Socially responsible investing means that you put your social, faith, and environmental concerns into your investment decisions. Perhaps this is expressed by not buying stock in companies that make tobacco products or alcohol, promote gambling or pornography, or make weapons of mass destruction. It could also mean asking a company that you do own stock in to no longer use suppliers that use forced labor to make their products. One could also invest in a community development project that would benefit women and children living in poverty.

From *Investing with Your Values*, by Brill, Brill and Feigenbaum, comes this rather sobering thought: "Our economic system is built on a deeply

ingrained but questionable idea: If each of us pursues our own self-interest, then the 'invisible hand' of the market will assure that the highest good for all is simultaneously achieved. As this idea has come to be enshrined in our society, the distorted result has been that the quest for individual or corporate profit nearly always takes precedence over community, environmental, and spiritual concerns."

In the quest for profits, the interests of those who live at the bottom rung of the global economic ladder are often forgotten . . . or left on the beach to perish.

How do you get started? One place to begin is with the ELCA's Division for Church in Society Corporate Social Responsibility office. Trudy Brubaker, director, and Pat Zerega, assistant director, have available for you a collection of material on socially responsible investing. These guidebooks will enable you as an investor to look at a wide variety of socially responsible investment companies and other strategies for using your money in a responsible way.

Investments bring returns. The higher the better, we hope. After all, the quality of our lives or the well-being of our families may depend upon those quarterly payments. It's good to know that we can invest our dollars in a socially responsible way and still achieve a high—or possibly higher than average—yield.

In the same way we look to our finances for personal betterment, gift dollars can be an investment in bettering the lives of others. A gift to Women of the ELCA's

"Women and Children in Crisis Program No. 528" is an excellent way to achieve immeasurable results for individuals and communities across the nation. How? Gift dollars from Program 528 are paid out annually as grants to organizations and projects typically sponsored or run directly by Lutherans. This year our grant recipients dealt with a broad range of issues, including rural concerns, at-risk children, health care, parenting and family support, prison ministries, conflict management, leadership development, and economic empowerment.

Typically, socially responsible investing uses three different approaches to promote responsible business practices:

1. Screens are the conscious effort to buy or not to buy certain stocks in an investment portfolio or mutual fund. Using the ELCA's Social Statements (available at www.elca.org/dcs/corp.html) as a guide, an investor would look for companies that do not harm the environment, misuse workers through unfair labor practices, or make harmful products, such as land mines.
2. Shareholder advocacy describes the actions many socially aware investors take as part-owners of corporations, including talking with officials of companies on issues of concern, and submitting and voting proxy resolutions. Individual investors often give up a major advocacy opportunity to influence corporations by throwing away their proxies. The ELCA's Corporate Social Responsibility staff spends time researching corporations and does file shareholder resolutions on behalf of the ELCA with various companies each year. The major areas covered by shareholder resolutions by the ELCA include: Environment, Global Corporate Accountability, Equality in the Workplace, International Health,

Global Finance, and Militarism and Violence. Visit www.elca.org/dcs/coep.html for copies of these resolutions.

3. Community-based investments help to provide funding for low-income projects that might otherwise not get conventional loans. Community development banks and credit unions can put your money to work helping people in poor areas of the country to help themselves. For example, the ELCA and the United Methodist Church are involved in a program through local community funding to help victims of predatory loans in Minneapolis to keep their homes.

All of this may seem mind-boggling, but there are steps you can take so that you can sleep better at night.

1. Invest in the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA. This fund enables congregations, individual members, and ELCA-related organizations to earn competitive interest rates on their investment while furthering the mission and ministry of the church. Contact Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631, or call 800-638-3522, ext. 2943.

Women of the ELCA endowments also are yielding changed lives every year. These permanent funds, given to Women of the ELCA this year or in years past, were established by far-thinking people who believed in the power of women's ministry. Women of the ELCA endowment and other funds are invested largely through the ELCA Foundation. The Foundation follows the ELCA guidelines for socially responsible investing. Because of this, Women of the ELCA and those who help support the organization's efforts are assured

that its endowments will grow through a means not intended to harm the environment, take advantage of workers, or make dangerous products.

Women of the ELCA is a place where socially responsible investing has been a practice for more than a decade. Your gift investment in the future health and welfare of another will be well tended. In fact, we can guarantee you the finest results—in lives changed for the better! For more information on making such an investment, contact Catherine Marquis at 800-638-3522, ext. 2744.

2. Pray about developing a responsible investing measure. What types of stock will you tolerate in your portfolio? What will you not tolerate?
3. Look at your present retirement plan. Where are your funds invested?
4. Ask your financial advisor to help you “see” what’s in your current portfolio holdings. If you already have investments (or mutual funds), look and see if there are any companies that don’t meet your investing measure.
5. Find community development banks or savings and loans that reinvest in their communities, especially low-income neighborhoods.
6. Vote your proxy ballots. One easy vote is to look at the slate of candidates for board of directors. Is there any diversity?

When it comes to investing, it is important to remember that you do have a choice. It's your money, and you can use it for building a better world while still earning favorable returns—one starfish at a time!

Trudy Brubaker is the director for corporate social responsibility and community development specialist for the ELCA.

More Investment Information

Whether you're seeking guidance on an individual investment or for the entire congregation, the ELCA website offers lots of investment information that you can peruse at your leisure, 24 hours a day. You might want to begin by exploring the Mission Investment Fund (MIF) page at www.elca.org/ot/mif.

The first page gives a brief overview of what the MIF can enable you to do. Selecting one of the clickable buttons on the left-hand side of the page will take you to related pages that offer more in-depth information on specific topics, such as investment opportunities, current interest rates, focus on mission, and frequently asked questions. These pages are informative, easy to use, and very helpful. If you want more information or wish to contact a member of the MIF, simply click the "Contact Us" button and fill out the electronic form.

If you do not have access to the Internet or do not wish to communicate via email, you can obtain this helpful information by calling 800-638-3522, ext. 2943, or by writing the Mission Investment Fund at 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL, 60631.

PLAYgroups

Building Community



Parents of young children have mobilized, many through the ministry of their local church, to reinvent the idea of neighborhood support. They are joining national parents' organizations and starting their own neighborhood playgroups.

They have discovered that working together makes for less work, more support, and enhanced quality time. This trend reflects a reinventing of the old-style neighborhood that their parents may remember. It is also giving local churches a unique opportunity to minister to these parents, their children, and the community.

As I discovered when starting my own playgroup and conducting research for my book, *A Stay-at-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups*, playgroups and parents' groups provide crucial support systems to new parents in this phase of their lives. Playgroups offer a chance to connect with other parents, seek parenting advice, and share experiences. Indeed, playgroups give a sense of belonging to stay-at-home parents, who might otherwise be home alone with their children most of the day. Often some simple encouragement is enough to create a new outlook and an enthusiasm for parenthood that spills over into other facets of their lives.

"I belonged to a playgroup and baby-sitting co-op from the time my daughters were infants until they started kindergarten," says the mother of a 13-year-old daughter and 12-year-old twins in California. "Today, some of my most cherished friendships are with women that I met while in the playgroup. I would not

have survived the preschool years without God's help and this group of women."

In addition to emotional and spiritual support, parents can find practical assistance in a playgroup. Many playgroups institute "in-a-pinch" emergency services and baby-sitting co-ops where parents exchange baby-sitting duties. Best of all, because the parents and children know each other from the playgroup, they feel comfortable baby-sitting.

"My friends in playgroup helped me with my son during my difficult second pregnancy," says a mother of three from Florida. "They literally came in and did what needed to be done. It was the only break I got each week for several months. I was able to survive those months and to continue being a good mother to my son because of the support from playgroup."

Stay-at-home parents especially need the regular break of a playgroup to relax and get out of the house. Children, too, need to play with other kids. They can learn valuable skills, such as how to share, follow directions, and stay focused on a task. In addition, parents stay with their children during playgroup, alleviating separation anxiety.

What makes playgroups even more attractive to parents is that most are free, because members meet in each other's homes or in a central location such as



a church. Indeed, without the complimentary facilities provided by local churches, many playgroups would not exist. Even local chapters of national parents' organizations rely on local churches for meeting space. Most homes are not large enough to host a sizable group, and inclement weather prevents many groups from meeting at parks, especially in winter.

"Since our playgroup is so large, we meet at my church on the days we aren't at the library or on a field trip," says a mother of three from Illinois. "My church was nice enough to let us meet in a large room they have for free each Monday."

Many churches realize that opening their doors to playgroups may be the first step toward making a real difference in the community, and not just to parents. Whether it's a specific ministry to area parents or simply an open-door policy to local groups, churches benefit from being used and from the enhanced perception as supportive, generous, welcoming, and available. A church grows when it contributes to the community and creates a place where people want to be.

After all, the church is more than just buildings and grounds; the church is the people of its congregation. Indeed, many older people and grandparents become involved in their community by sharing their parenting wisdom and experience with younger parents, creating a mentoring environment. This type of

interaction provides positive reinforcement, information, resources, and encouragement. Seeing the contribution they have made to the community makes the experienced parents feel a sense of accomplishment, an appreciation for their wisdom, and the satisfaction that comes with helping others.

Being a full-time parent should be a rewarding and exciting phase in a person's life, and parents of young children need to be able to use this all-too-short time wisely. So, parents, enjoy this phase of your life.

A church grows when it contributes to the community and creates a place where people want to be.

Make new friends and learn from your peers. And grandparents, play your part, too! Become involved in your community and meet your neighbors. You can do all this together in your local playgroup.

Chances are that a playgroup, club, or local chapter of a national parents' organization already meets near you. You can search for one at www.onlineplaygroup.com. This website also lists resources for starting your own playgroup, such as the book *A Stay-at-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups* (ISBN 0-5951-4684-8).

Carren W. Joye is the author of *A Stay-at-Home Mom's Complete Guide to Playgroups*. In addition to home-schooling her four children, she has started four playgroups and home-school support programs throughout her community.

Blessed Are the PEACEMAKERS

by Sally Simmel



WE KNOW THAT WOMEN ARE MANAGERS AND mothers, community leaders and poets, artists and teachers, and peacemakers. In Africa, the title of peacemaker takes on whole new meanings, with many nations struggling with their own national, domestic, and community conflicts. These conflicts require mediation on a variety of levels.

The number of people directly impacted by violent attempts to resolve differences rose substantially during the 20th century. This period saw some troubling trends. One of the most disturbing features of modern warfare is that the majority of deaths due to war are no longer soldiers but ordinary citizens—men, women, and children who are attempting to live normal lives.

We need a commitment to the enhancement of peaceful ways of resolving disputes.

This past summer (during their winter), I met some of the women from across Africa who are committed to understanding the causes of conflict. They are learning new leadership, peacekeeping, and mediation skills in the hope of resolving these problems in peaceful ways. They caught my attention. They also caught my commitment to be in solidarity with them as they move forward in large and small ways.

One of the large ways they are moving forward is with a program called the Women's Peace Link. They describe themselves as a "dream team," and this summer (again, their winter) they initiated a special activity that they hope will pivotally involve women in transforming society.

The dream team is moving around Africa right now, particularly in the nation of Kenya and other rural areas where people feel marginalized. Members of this dream team are interviewing women about their roles as peacemakers in homes, communities, and beyond. In the process, they are affirming and encouraging women to have their voices heard as a first step out of war and violence.

This sounds pretty simple until you consider that the group didn't own a tape recorder or blank cassettes—and had no money to buy them. Then there was the question of transportation. How would they get around to gather the stories when there is no significant public transportation system and few people have their own vehicles? Add to the mix the need to take pictures so that the final product is successful in accurately depicting the women as real people with success stories and suggestions for resolving conflict. Simple cameras and film were needed, along with funds for developing the prints.

And so they move around huge distances in Africa, collecting stories in many languages, as people

living in the same nation may speak different languages. It makes most sense to record the women in their native tongue so that they can communicate more comfortably. The situations are diverse, depending often on local conditions, cultures, and conflicts about how things should be done and who should be in charge. They move from village to village, woman to woman, situation to situation.

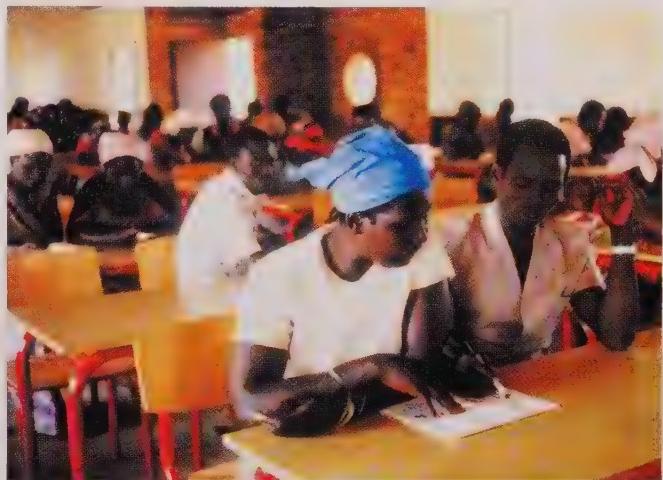
Now that I have been there, I can see them in my mind's eye traveling over dirt roads, intent on getting to women to record their experiences. Then I can almost hear them translating the stories into English so many others can hear the accounts and apply the skills in conflict-related fields around the world.

I can use my imagination to see them pulling the stories and the pictures together to create a book for use in peace and mediation training. Again, it sounds pretty simple to us. But in parts of Africa even paper has to be purchased by the sheet, and computer access is limited for the final manuscript. Thinking it might help, I took a couple of reams of paper to the post office to see about mailing them to Zambia. The cost would have been outrageous. Then it occurred to me that even the local purchase of paper aided the economy there. Along the way, the project will provide some income for the people who do the translating, editing, and transcribing. That is a good thing, too.

In all of our recent communication, there has been no "poor us" talk. They relay only the joy of being about God's work in their particular settings. Even as you read this, they will only be in the transcribing

process, working toward finishing the book for a special conference in Kenya this December. That will truly be the celebration portion of the project.

Now that I've met them, sensed their competence and commitment, walked and worshiped with them side-by-side, these women have become my heroes. Believe it or not, we communicate often by email and the messages are always positive.



"We have bought the tape recorders and lined up transportation. We are working on an internal funding plan. We are women, we are peacemakers. May God bless." Please pray for the women and their efforts.

My dream would be to encourage women in other parts of the world to add their stories to these. To create a body of work that lifts up and creates a critical mass of women, connected to one another by their sense of peace and justice for a global community of men, women and children.

As you might guess, with transcription and printing still ahead of them, the project is in need of some additional funding. For more information about this project or to offer funding assistance, you can reach Sally Simmel via email at ssimmel@elca.org or at 800-638-3522 ext. 2874.

Sally Simmel is director of ministry in daily life in the ELCA Division for Ministry.



Session 1

Calling Out to God

by James Arne Nestingen

Study Text

Luke 18:1–8



The Introduction to the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven.

What is this?

Answer: With these words God wants to attract us, so that we believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father. (From Luther's *Small Catechism*)

Memory Verse

"All will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?" (Luke 18:7)

Overview

God insists that we pray—commands it, promises to hear us, teaches us to pray, and finally intercedes for us through the Spirit by turning even our groans into prayers.

Opening

"All depends on our possessing God's free grace and constant blessing, Though all earthly wealth depart. They who trust with faith unshaken by their God are not forsaken And will keep a dauntless heart." ("All Depends on Our Possessing," Lutheran Book of Worship 447, verse 1)

Prayer: The Promise and the Problem

Prayer involves some of the deepest hopes of the human heart. In times of trouble, even the hardest hearts ask for God's help. Yet people of faith often speak of their difficulties with prayer. The disciples, even after much time with Jesus, said, "Lord, teach us to pray." Likewise, Paul confessed in Romans 8, "We do not know how to pray as we ought."

A child prays unselfconsciously. The more experienced a person becomes, however, the more one thinks about prayer, and the more difficult praying can become. This problem is common.

- 1. Name some common problems you think people have with praying. What are some of your own questions or difficulties?**

- 2. There's an old saying, "I would rather die than ask." How is asking a little bit like dying? Do you suppose our vulnerability can interfere with our ability to pray?**

Because God knows our struggles with prayer and understands what we need even before we ask, the Bible gives us the strongest encouragement to pray. There is a command, a promise, an encouragement or teaching, and even an intercession by the Holy Spirit for the sake of our prayers.

Most of our problems with prayer are rooted in thinking about who is praying rather than the one to whom prayer is addressed. Prayer doesn't have anything to do with our qualifications—if it did, no one would be qualified to pray. So with the command to pray, God leads us out of ourselves, in effect saying, "I don't care about that," or better yet, "I have already taken care of that, now pray!"

Praying under Command

In the Second Commandment, God says, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God" (Exodus 20:7). As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, this means we should not use God's name to curse, swear, lie or deceive, but instead to call upon him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.

Commands are often binding, cutting off other possibilities or pointing an accusing finger: "You shouldn't . . ." or "You aren't supposed to . . ." But sometimes commands can be freeing, giving us footing on which to stand. God does command that we pray, but this command only indicates how insistent God is to hear our prayers.

- 3. What accusations does the Second Commandment make? What encouragement can it provide for us?**

- 4. Why does Luther make the connection between not using God's name in vain and "calling upon him" in positive ways?**

The Promise of Prayer

Psalm 50:15 and Matthew 7:7 are some examples of the biblical promises concerning prayer.

Prayer is not just a pious exercise. God commands us to pray and makes a commitment to answer us. This is the promise of prayer: that God is listening, knows what we need before we even ask, and has already taken steps to make sure the prayer is answered appropriately.

- 5. Read Psalm 50:15. What is involved in "calling" upon God in this psalm? What two things does God promise to do when called upon?**

The words *deliver* and *glorify* describe outcomes that can manifest themselves differently in different people's lives. Compare some of the ways God has delivered you, a member of your family, or a friend. Explain how God was glorified in the fulfillment of these promises.

6. Read Matthew 7:7. According to this verse, who is supposed to ask, search, and knock? Are there qualifications the asker, seeker, or knocker must have before doing as Jesus commands? Does the text identify any times when a person cannot ask, search, or knock?
7. Read the rest of the passage, Matthew 7:7–11. In verse 8, Jesus underscores the promise by attaching the word *everyone* to each of the promises. What are the promises in these verses? Upon whom does their keeping depend? Name some ways that these promises have been kept for you.

Jesus Encourages and Teaches

In the Bible passage assigned for this session (Luke 18:1–8) and in the Lord's Prayer itself, Jesus gives us another encouragement to pray. Jesus not only teaches us about prayer but also teaches us to pray—we are helped to pray by the very one who decides how our prayers will be answered.

When Jesus encourages us so strongly in our prayers, it has a double effect: there is the encouragement itself, and then with it, the realization that the one doing the encouraging is always the one in whose name we finally pray. It is like being judged by your coach or evaluated by your parents. Even if there are some hard words between, the outcome is sure.

8. Read the parable in Luke 18:1–8. In biblical times there was neither life insurance nor social security. A widow not only lost her husband but also her economic standing. Name some other things that could make people lose heart.

9. Identify some ways in which being a widow in Jesus' time is similar to and different from being a widow today. In this parable, why is it important that the woman is a widow?
10. What makes the judge negative? What does his way of life tell you about the widow's chances?

The whole parable depends on setting up a contrast. In the end, neither the widow nor the judge is like God, but the widow, the judge, and the good Lord all come together at one common point.

11. Identify some instances when God might seem like the judge. Look at the text. How is God different from the judge? How does this encourage you to pray?

The church added these last words, "for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory," called the "doxology" to the Lord's Prayer, probably in the first or second century A.D., not long after the four Gospels were written.

The doxology underscores that the one who is teaching us this prayer, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Risen One who has defeated the power of death and therefore rules beyond the power of any earthly sovereign. Jesus has power over everything and will finally claim the earth and

whatever stands beyond it. Jesus, crucified and risen, expects to hear our prayers and so teaches us how to pray.

Look again at Luther's explanation of the introduction. In it, Luther says that God encourages us to faith.

12. Why is it that we have to be encouraged to believe that God has come into a relationship with us? How are you encouraged? Think of the struggles within your community. How might you provide encouragement?

The Spirit's Groaning

With so much encouragement to pray, it hardly seems like there would be need for another form of encouragement. But sometimes we sinners almost do have to die before we will ask for something, and so we stand at the door like an embarrassed teenager, both hands jammed firmly in our pockets, unwilling to knock until we have no other options. So the good Lord, in all graciousness, says something like this: "I've commanded, I've promised, I've become their own flesh and blood to teach them to pray, and still I don't hear anything. Oh, I know what I'll do—in my Spirit I'll intervene with myself for them, making their sighs and groans into prayers."

Read Romans 8:26–27. It seems like people of faith who are conscientious about their prayers have more trouble with praying than people who just find themselves in a time of trouble and call out.

The Triune Investment

Working through the introduction to the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father in heaven," we have

encountered each of the persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three in one, one in three. The Father, in and with the Son and the Spirit, commands us to pray, promising to hear us; the Son, in and with the Father and the Holy Spirit, encourages and teaches us to pray; the Spirit, in and with the Father and the Son, comes as close to us as our hearts and tonsils, making our deepest longings and most inarticulate sounds into prayers. The Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—signs his very name to our praying.

Besides worship, there are several other times when Christians commonly have prayed. Saying grace at the table and saying prayers at bedtime are two examples. Having prayer partnerships, in which two or more people agree to pray with and for one another, is another example. Many congregations have prayer chains in which people contact one another to pray for one another and those who are in special need.

Prayer Partners

Consider seeking out a prayer partner. Together, talk about ways in which you can support one another in your prayer life.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll move into the Lord's Prayer proper with the First Petition, "Hallowed be your name." In the course of your daily life and devotions, look at the way names work—good names, bad names, pretty names, harsh ones—and how other words go with them.

James Nestingen is professor of church history at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

Have You Started Planning for Philly?

by Dianha Ortega

The Women of the ELCA 2002 Triennial Gathering in Philadelphia is less than a year away. Have YOU started planning for it yet? If you have, wonderful! If you still haven't committed to joining us, read on for some thoughts that just might tip the scales.

Why should you go? There are many reasons why every woman in the ELCA should attend.

The Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering is the largest gathering of adults in all of the ELCA. Come see how the community of women disciples grow together, inspire one another, and go forth in unity and purpose.

As the women's ministry organization of the ELCA, Women of the ELCA's gathering highlights hundreds of reasons to celebrate the passion and determination women have to serve as Christ's people in the world today.

The 2002 Triennial Gathering will be the greatest gathering of women from the ELCA yet! For the first time, everyone will come together as one each morning for worship, prayer, and praise, in preparation for that day's ministry and growing. Look for future articles that will discuss these mass gatherings in detail.

Make new friends, rediscover the spark Jesus instilled in your heart, and have fun!

GETTING READY FOR THE CITY

Philadelphia is:

- The fifth largest city in the United States, the fourth largest metropolitan area in the nation, and the second largest city on the East Coast. Philadelphia is located at the crossroads of the Mid-Atlantic States and New England.
- Close to home for a lot of folks. Thirty-eight percent of the U.S. population lives within a four-hour drive of the city.
- Home to the Pennsylvania Convention Center where the 2002 Triennial Gathering will be held. This technologically advanced center covers six city blocks and is just six blocks from the nation's most historic square mile, which includes Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. The Pennsylvania Convention Center is accessible for people of varying physical abilities.

GET READY TO GET THERE

If you've been pondering how to get to Philadelphia, let us offer some options. Why not travel by bus? This is one of the most popular ways to travel to an event of this size. It's economical, and you will get to know other women on the way to your destination. How many buses can your community fill with women excited to be part of the Triennial Gathering?

Do you prefer to travel by plane? Located just eight miles from the City Center, Philadelphia International Airport is served by most major airlines, with approximately 1,300 flights daily.

Perhaps you're more of a train traveler? If so, Philadelphia serves as a virtual hub for Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, providing excellent service from Boston, New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. Philadelphia's 30th Street Station is the second busiest Amtrak station in the United States.

For some, an automobile trip is in order. The Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-276), the New Jersey Turnpike, I-95, and I-76 make Philadelphia readily accessible by car or motorcoach.

GET EVERYONE TO COME

Now that you know why you should come and how you can get there, how about inviting others to attend with you? Invite women of all ages. The contributions of young women help shape the spirit of women's ministries in powerful ways!

Don't forget to invite and encourage the women in your family, and your friends. Wouldn't this make for a great time for bonding, learning, and fun?

Of course, you may also want to invite the women in your community. Women of the ELCA is a place for all women to gather in discipleship. The 2002 Triennial Gathering is no different! What a great way for women in the community to better get to know one another.

Wouldn't it be great if women from each unit in Women of the ELCA came to Philly? Think about the networking possibilities for ministry and leadership! The Triennial Gathering can be your group's "one stop shop" for training in leadership, evangelism, and stewardship. More details about specific opportunities will follow in future issues of *LWT*.

GET SEEN

Let your group be seen and heard at the mass gatherings and exhibits. There will be opportunities to showcase your local women's group.

You will also have the opportunity to show a video of your group of women at the mass gathering! If you wish to show your group of women at the Triennial Gathering, send your videotapes to: Marian Stamos, Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631. All videotapes must be less than one minute long. The women on the video need to identify the name of your congregation and unit, your city, and state. All videotapes must be received no later than February 1, 2002.

GET EXCITED

You can help build the excitement, too. The Women of the ELCA 2002 Triennial Gathering promotional video is now available. See your synodical Triennial Gathering Promoter or your Synodical Women's Organization President to "check out" a copy of the video. Show it at an upcoming group event or retreat. See you in Philly!



The Symbol Sets the Tone

THE SYMBOL FOR THE TRIENNIAL GATHERING in Philadelphia in July 2002, a starburst of light and a stylized shell, serves as a vivid reminder of how God calls us to new life in Jesus Christ. This explanation of the symbol will help us better understand its purpose and gain deeper appreciation for its meaning.

The starburst of light that radiates from the golden background can serve to remind us of the mighty acts of God. Some things that come to mind may include:

- Creative light shining from the moment of creation.
- Guiding light provided by the pillar of fire that led Israel through the wilderness.
- Revealing light of the star that led to the infant Jesus' birthplace.
- Saving light on the dawn of the day of resurrection, the angelic light shining from an empty tomb.
- Transformative light, such as the flash of light experienced on the road to Damascus when Jesus called Saul to new life as the apostle Paul.
- Reminding light we see in the flame of the pascal candle in the sanctuary, and the baptismal candle handed to the newest sister or brother in Christ.

The shell, often used to pour water over a person being baptized, is a traditional symbol of baptism. In baptism, we drown daily to sin and rise daily to new life in Christ. The shell in the foreground overlays the starburst. Together, they symbolize God's call to listen, learn, live, and look at all of life through the promises of baptism, and to let the light of Christ shine through us and guide us in all our callings.

The words that accompany the symbol are "Listen, God is Calling." This theme reminds us that God calls us both individually and together as members of the body of Christ. Under this theme, the Triennial Gathering and women's ministry programming through 2005 will invite each of us, individually and together, to discern God's call with a careful ear, open heart, and readiness to respond. Come join thousands of your sisters in Christ (and some brothers, too) in listening to God's call and being mobilized to act boldly on our faith in Jesus Christ.

BETWEEN YOU AND ME

Separated at Birth?

by Catherine I. H. Braasch and Linda Chinnia

SOMETIMES, WE THINK WE MUST BE TWINS WHO WERE SEPARATED AT BIRTH. "PREPOSTEROUS," YOU SAY? LET US EXPLAIN.

One look in the mirror tells us that we don't have the same mother and father, let alone the same birth date. One of us is African-American, and the other is Caucasian. One still lives on the block where she grew up in Baltimore, and the other has moved 19 times and lived in six states since she was born in a suburb of San Francisco. One of us was raised from birth in the Christian faith, while the other was an adult convert to Christianity.

These differences and others could have kept us from discovering our sisterhood in Christ, our mutual strengths, and our ability to support one another in our particular callings. In July 1999, when Linda was elected churchwide president of Women of the ELCA and Cathi was beginning a third year as executive director, we were determined that this would not be so.

We became committed to a common goal: to lead as a team. We kept our focus on mission, on being clear about and respectful of each other's roles and responsibilities, on holding each other in prayer, and on speaking with one voice. Before long, we often were thinking with one mind, even finishing each other's sentences.

Do we always agree? No. As a leadership team, though, we do agree to yield to each other out of our reverence for Christ, our respect for each other's role and authority, and our trust in each other's good intent—both when we agree and, more importantly, when we disagree.

One of our greatest joys is hearing people say, "We love seeing our president and executive director working together." When that happens, we give thanks to God, to those who have noticed, and to each other that the spirituality of team leadership is bearing fruit. For even if we are not twins separated at birth, we have been adopted in baptism by the same Heavenly Father and received the same Holy Spirit.

Through Women of the ELCA, we're united in acting and leading boldly for Jesus' sake. So may it be for you, too.

Linda Chinnia is assistant superintendent of schools for the Baltimore Public School System, and churchwide president of Women of the ELCA.

Catherine I. H. Braasch is executive director of Women of the ELCA. She lives in the Chicago area.



AMEN!

This Is Your Love for Me

by Catherine Malotky

ARE YOU OUT THERE, GOD? IF I SIGH, DO YOU HEAR? IF THE TEARS COME, DO YOU SEE? IF I LAUGH? IF I WONDER? IF I BRIGHTEN IN DELIGHT? DO YOU HEAR, EVEN IF THERE ARE NO WORDS?

You began breathing in me when I was born. It was you who breathed into my nostrils the breath of life, wasn't it? It was you who launched the miracle that is my life.

Why is this true? Why would you care about me? You have fashioned the entire universe, from the most minuscule particles to the largest galaxies. That you would take time for me, to create in me one like no other, this is your love for me. I do not know why, but you have given me your name to call. And you came to be like me. In Jesus, you took on flesh and bone so you could be as close as you could be to me. This is an amazing thing—a miracle. I can eat and drink an incarnation of you in the holy meal.

You have done and continue to do these things. So I know you hear me, even the beating of my heart. You have invited me to pray, to speak so you might listen. And you, in turn, speak so I might listen. Jesus said to ask, search, knock. You will respond.

So give me the words. And when I don't have the words, inspire me to "speak" in whatever way I

can. You know me already. I need not be afraid to open my heart to you. With you, I can be needy. With you, I can be angry. With you, I can be shamed. With you, I am nurtured. With you, I am safe. With you, I am set free from shame. You love me in spite of—even because of—these things I'd rather hide from you.

Give me silence, too. Teach me to be still in your presence. Teach me to listen for you with all of my senses—to smell you in a cleansing rain, to feel you in silk's smooth wonder, to see you in the dusky purple of a night sky, to hear you in the laughter of children, to taste you in the bread and wine.

When I am troubled, bring your name to my lips. I want to see you clearly in the places where you seem most hidden—in my grief, in my fears, in the injustice that permeates this world. So many of your children labor under hardships beyond my imagining. Make me persistent in prayer for all who suffer. Make me an advocate where I can be.

Thank you for your name. Thank you for the invitation to call on you with my life. You are my God. In my best moments, I want no other.

Catherine Malotky is an ELCA pastor and plan benefits writer at the ELCA Board of Pensions.

READER CALL TOPICS AND DEADLINES

December 2001:

What are the temptations that you struggle with most?

Due August 20, 2001

January/February 2002:

Valentine's day: Is it simply a reason to buy fluffy cards and candy hearts? How do you make this celebration meaningful?

Due September 10, 2001

March 2002:

Share a powerful lesson you learned from an important woman in your life.

Due November 10, 2001

IDEANET TOPICS AND DEADLINES

December 2001:

The Fifth Triennial Gathering

What are your hopes and dreams for this Gathering?

Due August 20, 2001

January/ February 2002:

LWT's 14th birthday

Share what you have enjoyed most about LWT these last 14 years.

Due September 10, 2001

March 2002:

Young women seeing visions

What have you gained from being part of Women of the ELCA? What experience could you share with young women?

Due November 10, 2001

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Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd. Chicago, IL 60631-4189

800-638-3522, ext. 2730

womnelca@elca.org www.elca.org/wo

LWT Editorial Office

Women of the ELCA

8765 W. Higgins Rd. Chicago, IL 60631-4189

800-638-3522, ext. 2743

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Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred...let me sow love.
Where there is injury...pardon.
Where there is doubt...faith.
Where there is despair...hope.
Where there is darkness...light
Where there is sadness...joy.
Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not
so much seek to be consoled...as to console.
To be understood...as to understand.
To be loved...as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—*St. Francis of Assisi*

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